

URBAN NIGHTSCAPE AND ISSUES OF GENDER IN CALL CENTRE INDUSTRY IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Women in India were always accepted in conventional profiles of nurses, teachers, secretaries or clerks. But today, against this phenomenon a large number of women are joining call centres. In a transnational call centre, work during day time is very rare and typically starts in late evening hours. This comes into contrast with traditional gender roles of women as mother, wife or care taker within the family. Indian society, with all its diversities, remains traditional patriarchal system. As women enter the global labor pool, particularly its nightscape, they experience negative gender based reactions like “what these women are doing in the night?” or “why are they out of there places for so late?” which are generally given to prostitutes or bar dancers. These kinds of reactions or comments provide a context for thinking about women’s access to night shift employment opportunities. Against this background I have made an attempt to study and analyse how does their family relate themselves to their work? How they negotiate their gendered identity and whether call centre industry in context of night shift employment is better suited for women professionals? Thus, it would be useful to look into the new image of women in India “breaking of stereotypes” and working in non-traditional sector of employment.

Keywords: *working women, call centre industry, night shift employment.*

1. INTRODUCTION

At the turn of millennium India has numerous reasons to smile about. During the past few years, the country has phenomenal developments in its social and economic infrastructures. The economy is no longer passive and redundant; on the contrary, it is one that is being geared by the strong forces of globalization and information technology. The booming IT sector, specifically Business Process Outsourcing has driven the country into the epicenter of change. In no time India has turned into a hot destination for global outsourcing. Now days, more and more companies are outsourcing their business to India.

As a result of technology a higher proportion of jobs are going to women. Flexibility of time and location had made it ideal for women workers who aspire to pursue their career even when societal and familial pressures would want them to be confined to their homes. Women can therefore work for a multinational corporation and raise that extra income to be financially independent and empowered. Women constitute half of resources of the nation. Girls of younger age group prefer working in call centers and in order to earn high they work atypical hours and adopt an illusory identity which is far from their own realities. (R.Drashan,2014) Call Centre is being one of the significant sources of jobs to educated women in a major way.

The advantage of time factor has not only provided employment but also become the source of most of women’s family problems. It is expected that it would have an effect on her physical and mental health as well. This study deals with the problems occurring due to the unusual hours of work. It looks into the changes in the urban outlook, where it was taboo for girls to travel alone out of house in night and now they are encouraged to work and do nightshift at call centres. In the present transitional development of state, such changes are expected to have a profound influence upon different dimensions of the family system affecting the members in social and economic context. As women are working in shifts at odd hours, it has an impact on the safety, physical and mental health, as the time required for sleep and rest is converted into working hours. Thus when energy levels are low, they work and when energy level is high they sleep. This adjustment process negatively affects the physical balance and well being.

2. Statement of problem

The study, in small measure brings about an analysis of women from middle class families in new areas of employment. Women in India have taken up professional roles to create an identity of her own and have risen above socio cultural traditions to exploit their potential in the employment sphere. Women in India were always accepted in conventional profiles of nurses, teachers, secretaries or clerks. But today, against this phenomenon a large number of women are joining call centres. In a transnational call centre, work during day time is very rare and typically starts in late evening hours. This comes into contrast with traditional gender roles of women as mother, wife or care taker within the family. Indian society, with all its diversities, remains traditional patriarchal system. As women enter the global labor pool, particularly its nightscape, they experience negative gender based reactions like “what these women are doing in the night?” or “why are they out of there places for

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3. Methodology

Having myself been surprised by the ability of Indian call center women executives to quickly switch from mother tongue affected Hindi to speak foreign accent affected English, I decided to study the hotly debated subject of Indian call centres in the context of identity negotiation. In the summer of 2012, I set out a brief period of field work in New Delhi NCR, in two well known Call Centers that serve as the back offices for North American and Ethiopian countries for multiple businesses. Each of the centers where I conducted research was located in city’s outskirts, having extremely high levels of security, barring any non-affiliates from entering the buildings. This stipulation, though strictly enforced, was unfortunately a hindrance to my method of research which was based on informal interviews. Over a period of three weeks, I interviewed 25 call center women executives with plethora of questions in mind. As I began my field work, I became increasingly interested in how does entry into transnational spaces impact how women view and represents themselves within the family unit and how they negotiate their gendered identity. The employees whom I interviewed were young college graduates, well-educated and ambitious. The work force is highly urban-centric thus all the employees hail from urban areas. This becomes more evident in the case of women professionals where all of them belonged to type-1 or type-2 cities and none of them came from the rural areas.

4. Profile of Call Centre Agents

In my study of 25 call centre women workers, findings shows that a majority of them fall in the age category of 21-25 years. This industry is relatively new and encourages people to join at young age. My sample also substantiates this fact. Chart-1 depicts the age composition of women working in call centre. There were three women working in the call centre below the age of twenty years. Sixteen respondents were between the age group of 21-25 years. There were four and two respondents between the age group of 26-30 and 31-35 years respectively.

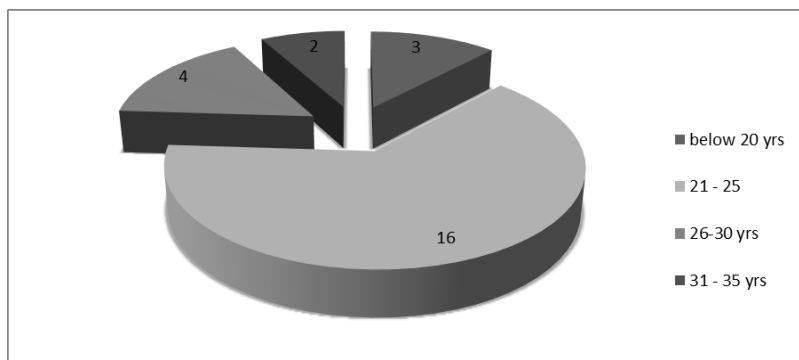


Fig. 1 Age Composition

Chart-2 depicts that out of 25 respondents sixteen fall in the category of unmarried. Seven out of 25 were married. They come from nuclear family and had nothing to do at home. Rests of the two were divorcees and finds call centre employment as a medium to be economically independent.

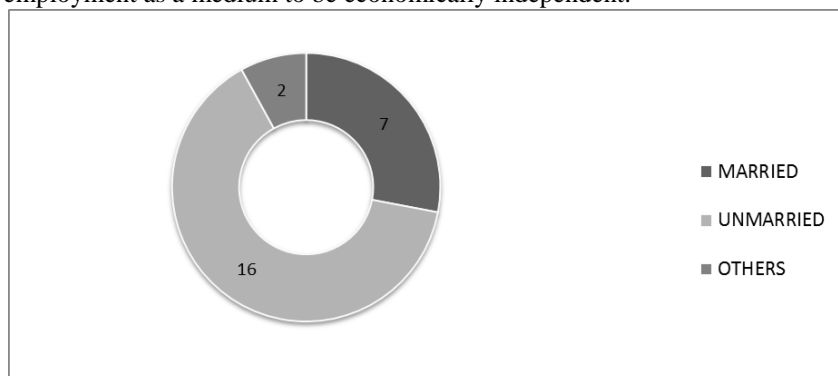


Fig. 2 Marital Status

Chart-3 depicts that out of 25 respondents ten were from engineering and fifteen were from non-engineering background. Centre employment does not need any major degree. Sample shows that majority of respondents are fresh graduates. Seven were pursuing their studies. Three holds masters degree and three holds diploma.

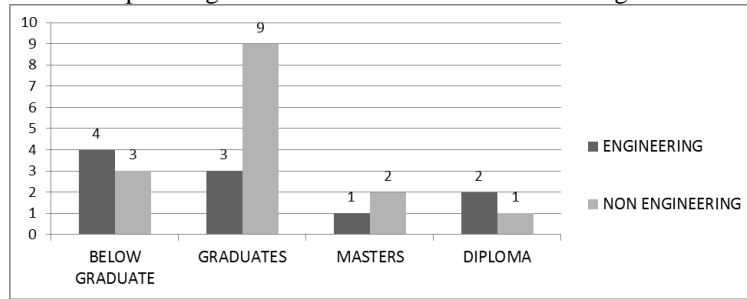


Fig. 3 Educational Background

Chart-4 shows that there are twenty women working at lower level management. Fifteen as customer care executives and five as senior executives. There are only five women working at upper level management, three of them as team leaders and two of them as managers.

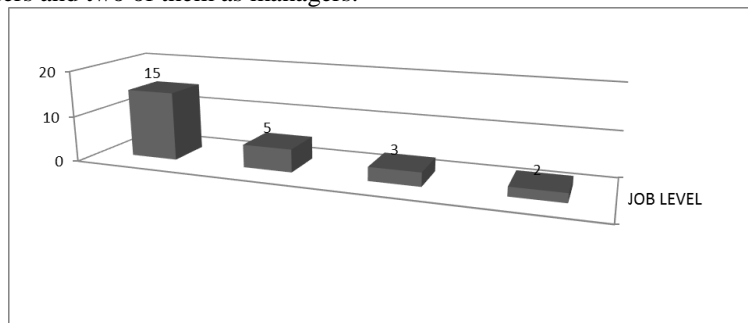


Fig. 4 Job Level

Chart-5 shows that out of 25 respondents twenty two are from nuclear and three are from joint families.

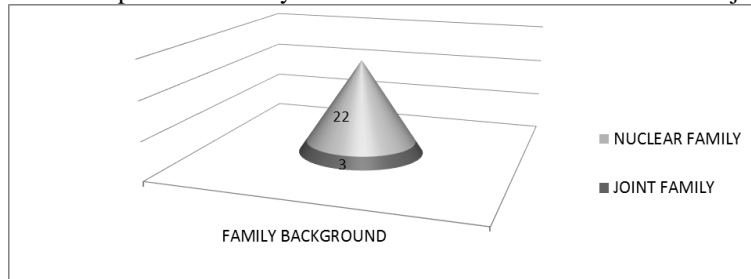


Fig. 5 Family Background

5. Pros and Cons of Call Centre Employment

The establishment of outsourcing as an essential compound in India's economy is a result of explosive development of Information Technology and globalization process. Positive and negative impact to the people of India especially on women call centre workers are brought about by this new trend. The most significant impact of outsourcing in India is on its economy and increasing participation rate of women in paid labour force. Business process outsourcing to India increased the employment rate with 100,000 people being hired annually. Though, the salary of those people working in India is lower than those of their developed counterparts (Nag, 2004). Participation of women is constantly increasing from 27% of the total workforce in 2012 and is expected to touch 43% in 2015 (NASSCOM foundation, 2012). The development of new infrastructure in India is another affirmative impact on the BPO. Aside from this, outsourcing also brought about the transmittance of ideas and technology to India (Nag, 2004).

The progression of the call centre industry in India brought about changes in the culture and society of the nation. India which is a patriarchal society is now faced with the issue of social, cultural and economic women empowerment because the call centre industry prefers to hire women. These women call centre agents acquire financial independence hence their outlook career, and attitude changed from being subordinates of the patriarchal society into women capable of being and asserting themselves in their society and families. Despite independent financially their social status in the society is not much changed because their work is considered inferiorly dignified due to the night working hours. (Pradhan and Abraham, 2006)

Though provides positive impacts to the people in India, it also goes along with its negative attributes. Most of the women call centre workers due to unconventional working hours undergo panic attacks, stress, relationship troubles, depression, and relatively no social life. The nature of working hours brought about social division wherein the working class youth are alienated with their peers because they are not able to socialize with them (Pradhan and Abraham, 2006).

There are some negative aspects of this job. Women living in far off destinations find it very risky to travel at night. Night shift employment also has a social stigma. The risk associated with working the night shift are principally social stigma and sexual assault: women who work the night shift have been accused of prostitution and of being indecent of being out to their place. Nevertheless, through their choice of work, these women are expanding permissible places for women to be present. Patel (2006) in her comprehensive study of women night shift call center work explain: "...a women out at night is seen as both at risk (in need of protection) and risky (in need of discipline and control). These dual anxieties are reflected in family, community and media responses to the growing phenomena of women working the night shift in call centers."

Nightscape is primarily a male domain. For educated, middle and upper class women, the nightscape bring forth gender and class connotations that mark their bodied as sites of transgression (Cresswell, 1996; Domosh, 1998). In contrast of their male counterparts, the presence of women in India's urban nightscape negatively impacts a family's reputation. "What will people think?" is a common response women receive from family members expressing hesitancy about nightshift employment. Such remarks can be linked to notions of middle class morality, which mark women bodies as the site of family purity and honor (Patel, 2006).

6. Discussion

Call centre is relatively a new industry that encourages people to join at younger age. Does this have relevance to qualification and attrition rate of labour? I enquired from the call centres and found that company does not require any major degree. However, since the need of the call centre was to employ people due to high demand they started giving jobs to undergraduates. Housewives also attached to this job "just-to-add-a-little-more" to family's economy as they find it "best to accommodate with the need of household chores".

Most women in call centre prefer to remain unmarried for a longer period of time as they want to be economically independent before marriage. There are lesser number of women from the age group of 26-30 and 31-35. The reason behind there exclusion is that they find it inconvenient to pursue nightshift after marriage or particularly after having a child. In India working married women find it difficult to continue with their careers because they attach primacy to their domestic roles (Chakraborty, 1978). Since call centre employment have night duties and long hours of work, women employment is rare at the reproductive age in call centre. Pratha joshi, (Customer Care Executive, IBM, Gurgaon) says:

A wife's career is considered secondary to that of her husband. If someone has to stay with a sick child or unexpected guests, it is wife that has to accommodate her schedule accordingly."

Data shows that there are lesser women at managerial level. Women basically concentrate at the lower levels. This shows that there is no gender segregation in job at lower levels but traditional roles and household responsibilities constraint them to move upwards. Here is what Ila Jha (Team Leader, InterGlobe Technology, Gurgaon) has to say:

"Being women is our major career obstacle. We have multiple roles to play. Women, here, occupy entry level or mid-level positions and men move into higher positions."

Reason behind women's absence at managerial position is because they move out of the employment structure to accommodate with social settings of marriage, children and household. Here is what Latika Somvanshi (Customer Care Executive, IBM, Gurgaon) has to say:

"The reason for women being less at the upper level management is due to lack of motivation and opportunity to sustain careers as they have to play different roles in family"

Women are generally quite satisfied at lower levels as against their male colleagues even though they are professionally quite competent. The reason is that the lower level requires lesser commitments and responsibilities. Thus, the job gives them better scope of balancing their family and work life. Most of the respondents leave major household chores to their parents if they are unmarried and married women were stressed because their husband does not help them in their household responsibilities. 88% out of 25 respondents says that they are unable to balance work and family life. The respondents have no social life as well. Here is what Geetika Chaudhury (Customer Care Executive, InterGlobe Technology, Gurgaon) has to say:

"The day you start working in a call center, forget your relations. I mean you won't get enough time to sit and talk to them. About 95% of these jobs have only night shifts. Working in the night is okay, I mean there are other jobs in which one has to work in the night but the stress one has to suffer in a call center is tremendous. I mean working in the night and sleeping in the morning. No social life, just work and that too talking on the phone whole night."

7. Findings

There are eight major issues that came out from the research work undertaken:

- Women in call centre prefer to remain unmarried for a longer period of time as they want to be economically independent before marriage.
- The reason behind the exclusion of women from the age group of 26-35 is that they find it inconvenient to pursue nightshift after marriage or particularly after having a child.
- There is no gender segregation in job at lower levels.
- Household responsibilities and traditional gender roles makes women vulnerable at their professional front.
- Women are satisfied at lower levels because it requires lesser commitments and responsibilities that gives them better scope of balancing their family and work life.
- In call centre, particularly its nightscape, women workers find it difficult to balance their work and family life.
- Call centres employment have quickly changed women's status in family but they are slow in improving their social status.
- Employment in call centre for women is still considered to be less dignified due to odd working hours and is a social stigma.

8. Conclusion

Employment in call centers changes the role of women in number of ways. One obvious way is that work in call center challenges and changes the position of women by physically taking her away from home. Because working in a call center involves working in nights, they often have little time to spend with other family members, even if they live at home (Patel, 2006). Indeed gendered norms about what women can and can not do continue in the contemporary era too. These norms continue to mark women's bodies as the site of family honor and purity. It ranges from what constitutes proper attire for women to the type of work they engage in. Call center employment certainly leads to new forms of temporal mobility for women workers because it provides them with a legitimate reason to get out of the house, particularly at night. Although call centres have quickly changed women's status in family, they are slow in improving their social status (Remesh, 2004). Employment in call centre for women is still considered to be less dignified due to odd working hours and is also sexually stigmatized (Pradhan and Abraham, 2006).

Women in all strata of society share some common challenges. The biological and social roles of women as mother, home makers and carers circumscribe their ability to function on an equal basis with men in most economic spheres. It happens in traditional occupations loosely described as the old economy and is likely to persist even in the new economy. They have to face greater barriers than men in obtaining education and training. Societal roles or biological qualities do not always work against women. For example, the patience and persistence needed for repetitive work, or the ability and inclination to work as a team are qualities that management often associates with women. Similar condition leads to recruit young women in large numbers in BPO and transnational call centers (Mitter, 2004). Women have been able to capture a large proportion of jobs in BPO and BPOs have also been quick to realise that women possess qualities that make them particularly suited for jobs within the industry. In India's patriarchal society, emergence of call center is nothing than a social reform movement. Through their work women call centre workers are transforming gendered norms and are bringing new meaning to what is to be a woman in this world.

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